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ABSTRACT

Collaboration is often cited as fundamental to systemic change efforts. This paper presents a process-based model for collaboration, which can be adopted as part of systemic, generative change. Schools attempting to create a collaborative culture often encounter the following problems: collaborators who fail to translate their experiences to others; models that do not match experience; and participants who engage in organizational politics. The proposed model is grounded in social processes, and identifies four domains of collaboration: engagement, negotiation, performance, and assessment/evaluation. Engagement is the process through which the group or individual develops an understanding of the problem. Negotiation refers to the development of an action plan in which objectives are clarified and the meaning of success is defined. Performance refers to the actual work done by the group. Assessment entails systematic reflection of outcomes and processes. The model attempts to demystify the process by not specifying a set path to be adhered to by participants. (LMI)

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Enhancing Systemic Change Through Effective Collaboration: A Formative Perspective and Approach to Collaboration

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Enhancing Systemic Change Through Effective Collaboration: A Formative Perspective and Approach to Collaboration

Collaboration and Systemic Change: Collaboration is often cited as fundamental to systemic change efforts. There are very sound reasons for this. In the recent ASCD ***The Governance of Curriculum*** Sue Lusi (1994: 109-130) framed it thusly:

> Performing work of an uncertain nature requires continual, collaborative learning...learning that goes beyond what individuals by themselves can create (120). Working in teams facilitates the free exchange of individuals and brings the expertise of individuals to bear on given problems (122). The actions of...staff will...have to be governed by a shared set of beliefs, values, and purpose...clearly important for guiding people's actions in situations where these actions cannot be carefully prescribed (124). Building a shared vision and goals for the system...will be of paramount importance if support for systemic reform is to be sustained over a period of time...(127).

Indeed, Squires and I have yet to see any other organizational form that can so rigorously support, foster, and generate systemwide changes and development (see Fullan 1993). The aim of our work, ultimately, is to make collaboration understandable and accessible to everyone. Toward this end, we present a collaboration model, based on process, which we developed to anchor ourselves in the systemic change efforts in which we were participating.

We recognize that definitions of systemic change are evolving. We are following others[1] in adopting a generative notion of systemic change, which we understand as intentional change that emerges from and coordinates with the needs and processes of a system.

Collaboration is logical, for who better to involve in planning, tracking, and evaluating systemic change than participants of the systems themselves?

Understanding Collaboration: Even if one believes that collaboration is a powerful tool in systemic change efforts, as we do, the thought of building a collaborative culture is unnerving. We think that at least part of the problem lies in the difficulty that successful collaborators have in translating their experiences to others. What typically emerge from such experiences are lists of collaboration skills, the application of which largely depends upon the informed intuition of individuals.

Another difficulty in creating a collaborative culture lies in the collaboration models currently in use. These models are aimed at mapping successive stages leading toward success. None of them matches up well with experiences we and apparently others have had. One man, who was facilitating one of the first meetings of an interagency collaboration at the Swanton Elementary School in Vermont, put it better than we ever could. He held up a piece of paper with a collaboration model on it for everyone to see. The model, like many we've seen, outlined a multi-stage "process" to ensure a successful collaboration. He then remarked to the group in a kind of perplexed irony, "I've never gotten beyond Stage 3, and I've been in a lot of collaborations." We contend that any collaboration model that purports a path to success has little to do with process (no matter how creatively looped the stages or steps appear to be).

Squires and I initially turned to definitions of collaboration[2] for the grounding we needed to work with collaborations. These helped us understand that collaborations are organized to produce something of benefit to the collaborating participants that no one participant alone

would or could achieve. This means that participants need to discover new, creative ways of managing resources and streamlining efforts to curb redundancies.

We likewise have learned to appreciate that for all the excitement successful collaborations rightfully engender, they are also difficult, often charged with turf tensions and organization propriety and politics. Personnel changes, home organizations changes, resource changes of any kind, any and all of these can scatter a collaboration. We cannot calculate how many resources have been tied up or lost through failing collaborations, making it all the more urgent to investigate the processes involved in collaboration.

The Model: Our model is based on social processes, what people are actually doing and experiencing during their collaborations. Even though it aims both to order and make process predictable, the model does not prescribe a path or imply success. We identify four domains of engagement, negotiation, performance, and assessment/evaluation. We believe that they are cornerstones in all collaborations, but that they are neither starting nor ending points. Thus, for example, even though collaborations often begin with engagement of some sort, we have frequently observed that participants' initial efforts are spent performing (or doing the work).

With this in mind, we define **engagement** as a phase in which the group or individual develops an understanding of the collaboration. People have different ideas about what the collaboration is and about how it should proceed. Without opportunities to clarify ideas and intentions, individuals may feel an escalating loss of purpose and control over their efforts. For instance, in the case of the Vermont Institute in Science, Math, and Technology (VISMT),[3] the newly hired staff immediately went to work, tackling the various sectors

targeted for change: curriculum, assessment, pre-service, inservice, business/school partnerships, etc. Squires found significant levels of confusion and frustration among the staff she interviewed. As one told her, "There is a pressure to the tasks. No one can take the time to connect. There needs to be a vision so we can see where we are going and see what our part in it is. We need to have conversations, share how to get there." As in other collaborations we have observed, the VISMT staff had begun to "perform" before they had developed a shared understanding of the purposes for which VISMT was charged or had even negotiated a process for performance and accountability.[4]

In the **negotiation** phase, the collaboration develops an action plan in which objectives are made clear and the meaning of success is defined. This involves 1) taking into account, resources, needs, and policy constraints of each member; 2) exploring conceptual and practical similarities and differences of each member; and 3) clarifying accountability for performance, assessment, and evaluation of the action plan and collaborative process.

Negotiation eats more time than the actual performance in some cases, and collaborators can become frustrated, even exhausted, in the process. For example, one member of a collaboration of a private-nonprofit agency and state agency observed,

> We had to negotiate all three moves ahead: tasks, roles, ideas. Now [whatever] has to be done has to be done through negotiation. Before the [other group joined us] we didn't need to explain the whole procedure. It's a bit tiring. We found we need to be sensitive in the way of presenting, and to agree to disagree about individual ideas. But I love 'em. I love these guys. I don't trust you, but I love you.

In negotiation, personal investments in the ownership of ideas often surface, clashing with the concomitant need to compromise. Ignored or suppressed, these and other time-consuming tensions will jeopardize the effectiveness of the collaboration.

In the **performance** phase, collaborators do the work of the action plan and participate in the collaboration processes. When the work is going well, all proceed confidently with what they need or have agreed to do. When something changes participants may feel or sense others are "out of phase" with plan or process. To illustrate, in a collaboration of a state and private, nonprofit human services agency, one participant assessed:

> The collaboration was "natural" for "us," but hard to explain. Yet "our" task was to try to explain "it" to others, so the group got together to discuss "how we should do this. It felt as if we were starting all over again. We can still do the 'natural' work well. We know that piece because we came to that piece." But working as a team "in a forced setting that is task-oriented is something else--not natural! We were service-oriented not task-oriented..."

When the work is going well, members almost take the collaboration process for granted. Changes can contort the smooth feel of the process, and members must remind themselves or be reminded to revisit engagement and/or negotiation.

In **assessment and evaluation**, collaborators systematically reflect on their effectiveness and appraise the outcomes of action plans and the process. We learned a good deal about collaboration by listening to the ways people talk about their experiences.

> One member of a business/parent alliance said, "I have learned that working in a team [means that] I have to learn to let go, allow others to do various tasks. Sometimes

> when I'm forced...to work as [part of] a team, I ask myself, 'why am I doing this?'" Another member responded, "Yes, it's hard to hand it over." The first speaker agreed: "[You] have to learn to trust [others]. The second speaker added, "Allow those who do something best to do it. It's the getting done not the doing that's a learning."

Collaborators assess their participations in far more subtle ways than we would ever have heard or captured had we not been cognizant of collaboration processes. This suggests that collaborators will profit by learning how to identify and self- and group-monitor the process.

Toward this end, we are developing a facilitated exercise, which creates structured and safe opportunities for people to experience and begin to learn about collaborative processes. The exercise revolves around the development of a product, provides raw materials in limited amounts, and compels the group to recognize process through external and self-monitoring. Participants have realized that their leaps into performance have created confusion and made them realize the importance of careful, if time-consuming negotiations and engagement.

Some Conclusions: Let us end by summing that until recently, collaboration has largely been mystified through models that purport success or by legends of successful collaborations attributable to some unique characteristic of a particular group (e.g. leadership, personality, even luck). Skilled collaborators can well describe what they do, but they are not always able to convey their experience in ways that help others collaborate more effectively. Rather, they tend to focus on individual skills like coaching; hence the growing skills list of what it takes to be a good collaborator.

Once we learned that collaboration is not the mystery it seems, we began to develop a process model, capturing what we had regularly observed. The model has proved useful to our evaluation responsibilities, and is proving to be a powerful learning tool for collaborators themselves.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Louis and Miles 1990: 193; Stacey, 1992; Fullan, 1993)

2. See e.g., Hord, 1986; Lieberman, 1986; Kagan, 1991; Swan and Morgan, 1992; Freeman, 1993; Crowson and Boyd, 1993; Fullan, 1993.

3. VISMT is an NSF funded initiative charged with organizing, implementing, and evaluating the systemic change of Vermont's science, math, and technology teaching and learning.

4. Crowson and Boyd (1993) describe the type of collaboration that VISMT staff were suggesting they needed as **integrative**. In this type of collaboration the group works to develop common conceptual grounds that frames and guides negotiation, performance, and assessments. Another type of collaboration is described as **stakeholder** (ibid.), in which the spoken or unspoken assumption that members make is that from the processes of negotiations, performance, and assessment, the group will develop common understandings and trajectories. We caution that these types suggest tendencies more than boundaries. We also note that the **arena of engagement is far more complex than we can elaborate here**: to wit, developing common understandings may emerge from negotiation processes and/or performance and assessment activities as much, if not more, than from the intentional engagement activities that fit more closely Crowson and Boyd's characterization of an integrative type of collaboration.

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